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Lawyers' Assistance Program offers help with work, life issues

When an attorney asked the other day what I liked most about lawyering on my own, I quipped that the partnership meetings are really short. This quasi-mirthful response points out that self-reliance is integral to solo practice. But the potentially harmful effects of working in isolation are no joke. The legal profession in general presents many stress factors, and those pressures, together with personal complications — financial setbacks, bereavement, divorce and addictions, to name a few — can be magnified for a lawyer who practices in a figurative vacuum. The ARDC's most recent annual report backs this up. One-quarter of all discipline cases involved some form of addiction or other impairment, and sole practitioners comprised nearly 70 percent of that group.

The good news is you don't need to deal with such entanglements on your own. The Lawyers' Assistance Program Inc. is waiting for your call.

LAP is a not-for-profit corporation that has been providing swift, responsive and confidential assistance to lawyers, judges and law students for nearly 25 years. LAP is funded in part through a portion of your annual attorney registration fee. With offices in Chicago and Belleville, LAP reaches persons in need across the state.

Call early and often

LAP's executive director, Robin M. Belleau, believes it is partic-

ularly important for the sole practitioner to take advantage of LAP's services. Belleau cautions that the nature of solo work promotes seclusion and offers little chance to vent at the office water cooler with colleagues.

Whether you have encountered a difficulty at work or in your personal life — or even scored a professional victory — experiencing those events in solitude can affect your well-being, and your ability to serve your clients, Belleau explained.

At present nearly a third of all persons contacting LAP are sole practitioners, and the organization wants to help all solos who reach out. Belleau stressed there is no such thing as a needless call to LAP. "Call early and call often — especially early," she suggested, and get some help from people who know how to guide you through your particular situation.

People tend to believe the program is primarily for treatment of alcohol abuse, (Robin M.) Belleau continued, but LAP can assist with countless issues that affect your life and your practice.

Assistance for wide-ranging issues

LAP provides help for any virtually problem, small or large, simple or complex, work-related or personal. Perhaps you feel the effects of losing a chunk of your business or did not prevail at the trial you were sure would go your way.

What about that disgruntled

SOLE SPEAK

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client who threatens to file an ARDC complaint? Or, you may already have received a dreaded inquiry letter in the mail. Your spouse might have decided to call it quits, or you could be grieving for a lost loved one.

Possibly you wonder if drinking habits have affected your practice, or you were charged with DUI or drug possession. Whatever the issue, LAP will help see you through, from beginning to end. They are on your side.

Confidential assessment and treatment

When you make first contact, LAP will bring you in to speak personally with a trained professional, in confidence, about your issue. An assessment is performed to get you the specialized help you need.

Among other offerings, LAP runs two weekly open discussion

groups, for men and women, where anything is on the table for sharing and support. Additionally, there are two Alcoholics Anonymous groups that meet regularly and are open to lawyers, judges and law students. Other referrals are made as circumstances warrant.

Belleau made clear that communications to and from LAP are completely confidential. Your file remains private even if the ARDC makes the initial referral in a discipline case, but you have the option to share LAP treatment results with the ARDC for purposes of mitigation.

Getting the word out

Lastly, Belleau wants to remind all lawyers, judges and law students that LAP can be a vital resource in times of need.

People tend to believe the program is primarily for treatment of alcohol abuse, Belleau continued, but LAP can assist with countless issues that affect your life and your practice. You have paid for the service through your ARDC registration fee. There is no reason for practitioners, especially solos, to remain on an island and try to cope on their own.

It doesn't work.

Over the years, most sole practices experience peaks and valleys, and life circumstances present an array of challenges. Whether you were not aware of LAP, or you knew the program existed but never really thought about calling, don't forget about this valuable asset. Keep LAP's number handy and call when things get tough. I know I will.

Check out LAP's website at illinoislap.org, or call at 800-LAP-1233.